

The Regal Fritillary - Under the Guard's Wing

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FORT INDIANTOWN GAP -- In the low hills and fields of the massive Fort Indiantown Gap Military Reservation, an unusual relationship has developed between the National Guard and a rare butterfly.

The **regal fritillary** has taken refuge at the Gap, fluttering over the meadows and tank ranges that serve as training grounds for the Guard.

Never mind the bomb blasts that rattle windows miles away, or the rumble of armored tanks rolling through the brush. This fragile insect seems to like the place.

'The big bangs do not seem to bother them as a population at all,' said Jim Thorne, a botanist and director of conservation programs for The Nature Conservancy.

In fact, the explosions may help by creating fires during the spring that reduce plant species the butterfly doesn't like, and increase others that it does, Thorne said.

Lt. Col. Chris Cleaver, spokesman for the Pennsylvania National Guard, said it should come as no surprise that the Gap harbors the rare species.

'It's a unique environment out here in that it's closed to the general population,' he noted. 'There are very few areas in Pennsylvania where you would have the type of activity you have here -- periodic burning, use of military vehicles . . . there is a unique ecosystem that the Guard maintains with its training.'

The U.S. Department of Defense is taking a bigger role in environmental and conservation efforts on the land it controls, Cleaver said.

A presidential order signed during George Bush's administration created a program within the Defense Department to establish biological inventories on military lands.

The Nature Conservancy was hired by the Defense Department four years ago to document the state of the regal population at the Gap and determine how healthy it was.

The conservancy's study, done in cooperation with the National Guard, estimated there are more than 2,000 regals at the Gap.

'Two thousand is a very healthy population,' Thorne said, 'probably the best population anywhere for the **regal fritillary**.'

The regal, common in the prairies of the Midwest but rare in the East, is drawing the attention of butterfly fanciers.

'It's the only spot east of the Mississippi where we know for sure' that it exists, said John D. Laskowski, a member of the North American Butterfly Association who lives in Conestoga, Lancaster County.

Laskowski, who also owns and operates a tree farm with his brother near Carsonville, remembers when the regal wasn't so rare.

'The last record I have of the **regal fritillary** in Powells Valley was in the early 1970s,' he said.

The regal was common when Laskowski was a boy growing up on a farm, he said. Housing and commercial development over the last 30 years destroyed much of the butterfly's habitat, probably causing the decline, he theorized.

'I assumed they weren't anywhere in the local area,' he said.

The regal likes tall standing grasses with very few side branches, so it can fly away from predators quickly, Laskowski said.

The regal also likes to feed on the nectar of several species of wild violets and thistles that are common at the military reservation, he said.

'The tanks travel on the ranges there and the more frequent burn-off of those areas sets the vegetation back into an earlier successional phase,' Laskowski said. 'As long as the area is disturbed physically, these plants, which have a very good capacity to live in well drained, low nutrient soils,' will do well.

The regal is prized among butterfly lovers for its beauty. They have bright orange wings, with black and white spots. The fore wings have a showy orange hue and the hind wings are black and white. But the hind wing also has a unique blue-black iridescent sheen.

'People who are interested in butterflies are like people interested in birds,' Thorne said. 'They want to see rare species.'

Much of the credit for the regal's heartiness is due to conservation efforts of the National Guard, the botanist said.